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ABSTRACT

The degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with placement of some 1,300 students in modern language courses at the University of Washington, Seattle, is ascertained at the conclusion of a semester's study. Discussion of the means used for placement in five freshman and sophomore language courses is contrasted with results of a questionnaire requiring students to judge whether placement had been either too low, too high, or satisfactory. Tables are included. (RL)

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Student Evaluation of Foreign Language Placement

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A survey of student attitudes toward foreign language placement was carried out in Autumn Quarter 1968. About 57 per cent of the students in Spanish, 45 per cent in French, and 37 per cent in German expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with their placement. Students placed in French and Spanish courses were much more likely to claim they were placed too high rather than too low. Within a specific course placement category, students who thought they were underplaced generally scored higher on placement tests and course grades than the satisfied, who, in turn, surpassed the overplaced. These differences are most acute in Spanish. Requiring higher placement scores for certain courses may alleviate some placement problems but may very well create others.

Toward the waning stages of Autumn Quarter 1968, University of Washington students enrolled in freshman and sophomore level language courses in French, German, and Spanish were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire inquiring about high school and college foreign language background and securing judgments regarding the validity of foreign language placement decisions.

The Need for Evaluation. Since the origin of UW foreign language placement during the fall of 1963 thousands of students have been placed into University language courses in French, German, and Spanish through an evaluation of test scores measuring skills in reading, listening, and grammar. Although

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there has been abundant experimentation with different combinations of tests and test scores in an effort to improve the placement, too much of this has masqueraded as window dressing, or face validity, rather than culminating from empirically guided studies designed to validate placements. The major roadblock has been an almost complete lack of consensus about what constitutes "good placement," and the inevitable consequence of how to measure it. The alternative course of action has relied on scattered impressionistic reports from students and faculty alike with little assurance that these, in any meaningful sense, reflect general attitudes about placement.

Questionnaire Items. Although perhaps belatedly, in view of the abrogation of the College of Arts and Sciences foreign language graduation requirement, a student survey of attitudes toward placement was carried out in the fall of 1968. The two most pertinent questionnaire items were:

5. Which of the following determined your entrance to your present course?
   (0)--Placement test
   (1)--Placement test corrected later by agreement with instructor
   (2)--Other (without placement test)
6. If you answered (0) or (1) to question 5, did the placement test you had taken place you:
   (0)--Far below the level at which you think you should have been placed;
   (1)--Somewhat below the level at which you think you should have been placed;
   (2)--Right at the level at which you think you should have been placed;
   (3)--Somewhat above the level at which you think you should have been placed;
   (4)--Far above the level at which you think you should have been placed.

The sample was confined to students entering the University for the first time in Autumn Quarter 1968 who were taking a language course in French, German, or Spanish during the quarter and who answered (0) or (1) to question #5, that is, took a placement test. It is believed that over 90 per cent of the population filled out questionnaires.

Degree of Satisfaction. Students were placed into 101, 102, and 103, courses whose methods and objectives are primarily oral-aural, 201, a grammar course, and 202 and 203 (222 in French), which are reading and writing courses. There was a total of 489 placements in French, 380 in German, and 376 in Spanish. About ten per cent of the respondents, mostly in Spanish, were moved one course forward or back from their initial placement once the quarter began. Data in Table 1 refer to initial course placements and not courses which students necessarily took. Since only a tiny fraction of the respondents believed they were placed "far above" or "far below" the level they should have been, these categories were combined with the "somewhat below" and "somewhat above" categories. Thus for each course there were three categories—those who thought their original placement was too low, those who thought their original placement was too high, and those who were satisfied with their original placement. N's and percentages for the three categories within course levels of languages are shown in Table 1.

Are Students Placed Too High? The survey data indicate that students placed in French and Spanish courses who expressed dissatisfaction with the placement were much more likely to claim they were placed too high rather than too low. Even in the lower-level courses, such as 102 and 103, students would have preferred lower placement. The high-low ratio was 31 to 10 in French 102 and 35 to 12 in Spanish 102; in French 103, it was 50 to 11, in Spanish 103, 37 to 10. The disparities become even greater, of course, at the 202 and 203 (222) levels. The overall picture reveals that about 81 per cent of the French and Spanish critics thought placement was too high.

German placement, on the other hand, is not as lopsided; of the 139 German dissatisfieds, 74 felt they were placed too high and 65 too low.

Collectively, German students are much less critical of placement methods as seen from the relatively high satisfaction percentage.

Extent of Dissatisfaction. The absence of a convenient yardstick for ascertaining the degree of effectiveness of a given placement method precludes any easily formulated conclusions regarding its effectiveness. If the goal were to place accurately 100 per cent of the students, these methods leave much to be desired since only 63 per cent of the German students, 55 per cent of the French students, and 43 per cent of the Spanish students were satisfied with their placement. However, 100 per cent is undoubtedly a utopian goal. First of all, for placement purposes, tests are far from perfect measuring instruments. For instance, they disclose very little about the motivational level of a student; an ambitious student may find a course easy and unchallenging that a lesser motivated student, with identical test scores, may find difficult. Secondly, student evaluations of placement are unquestionably affected by a host of biasing factors, not the least of which involves grade expectations. Some students will be unsatisfied lest they receive an A or B, while others may be content with a C, effort and motivation notwithstanding. Differences between the grade expected at the outset and the end of the course may spell the difference between a positive and negative placement endorsement, even though the original expectation may have involved a very unrealistic assessment. It was noted in the previous section that students were more inclined to evaluate their placement as too high rather than too low. This could mean that they tend to look kindlier on a placement system that allows them to take courses that do not tax their abilities. Third, there is absolutely no prima facie evidence that all courses with the same number are going to require exactly the same from each student even though such an assumption is built into

the placement system. Teaching effectiveness, the teacher's approach to the subject matter, amount of study expected, types of examinations, and stringency in grading practices are highly variable features and could have much to do with a student's evaluation of his placement.

It is clear, then, that there is no magical satisfaction percentage that can function as an idealized standard for assessing placement. If one is willing to accept student evaluations as the best existing criterion for assessing placement, improvements in the French and Spanish placement might best be made by increasing systematically the exam cutting scores for each course. Reducing the number of misplacements in German presents more of a problem because the number of highs and lows are about equal. However, these suggestions presume that, within a specific course placement category, students who thought they were underplaced score higher on placement tests than the satisfied, who, in turn, score higher than the overplaced. Earlier remarks would also presume a descending order on course grades. Data in Table 2 provide a test for these hypotheses.

Placement Test and Grade Performances of the Dissatisfied. In every Spanish course having a N of ten or more in at least two evaluation categories, the test and GPA performances, without exception, conform to expectations. That is, students who felt they were placed too low, indeed, score higher on placement tests and subsequently prove better grade achievers than those who thought they were placed about right; similarly, those evaluating their placement as too high are surpassed by the "about rights" on test scores and grades. The gaps between the groups are most precipitous on GPA attainments, suggesting that the most salient gauge of a student's satisfaction with Spanish placement revolves around grade expectations. It is important to bear

in mind that the course N's listed in Table 2 refer to initial course placements, but the associated mean GPA's also include students who moved forward or back one course after the quarter began. Although this creates some messiness in interpretation it is unlikely that this factor alone is responsible for the huge differences.

The French data are not quite as clear-cut as the Spanish, but the same general tendencies persist. In 103 the mean GPA differences between "about rights" and "too highs" are negligible. Also, 201 students who thought they were placed too low fared rather poorly, though here the small N might be the cause. Though the reading and listening means vary in a predictable fashion, grammar scores are virtually unrelated to evaluation. A glaring reversal of the form chart crops up in German 102: the 21 students who believed they were placed too low attained a mean GPA of only 2.19, while those satisfied with their placement achieved 2.68. Despite this anomaly, the lows were placed into 103 with higher test scores than the satisfieds. But for the most part the evaluations are closely linked with test and grade achievements.

Arguments Against Increasing Cutting Scores. The tendency for many students to be placed in courses they regard as too difficult, especially in Spanish, and to a lesser degree in French, can be overcome by requiring higher placement scores for certain courses. Aside from the inherent limitations of student evaluation of placement, at least three arguments can be mustered for maintaining the status quo. First, higher placement scores should more evenly balance the highs and the lows, but may not reduce the number of negative evaluations since some students who expressed satisfaction with their placement may have had different thoughts about the matter had placement requirements been more rigorous. Second, another study in this series showed quite conclusively

that students initially placed in a course perform much better as a group than students who take the preceding course in the sequence (Beanblossom, 1970). Upping placement score requirements would provide them with an even greater advantage. And finally, with the demise of the Arts and Sciences foreign language requirement, there may be reason to conclude that because students currently enrolled in foreign language courses are volunteers rather than captives, heightened motivation and interest may operate to offset whatever hardships accrue from overplacement.

Table 1

Student evaluations of course placement by course level within languages (percentages in parentheses)

	Course Placement Evaluation			
French	Too Low	About Right	Too High	Total
101	2 (33.3)	4 (66.7)	—	6
102	10 (8.8)	73 (64.0)	31 (27.2)	114
103	11 (9.6)	54 (47.0)	50 (43.5)	115
201	10 (9.1)	63 (57.3)	37 (33.6)	110
202	5 (5.4)	51 (55.4)	36 (39.1)	92
*222	4 (7.7)	23 (44.2)	25 (48.1)	52
Total	42 (8.6)	268 (54.8)	179 (36.6)	489
German				
101	21 (25.3)	62 (74.7)	—	83
102	21 (19.4)	70 (64.8)	17 (15.7)	108
103	17 (15.6)	61 (56.0)	31 (28.4)	109
201	5 (8.8)	37 (64.9)	15 (26.3)	57
202	1 (4.5)	10 (45.5)	11 (50.0)	22
203	—	1 (100.0)	—	1
Total	65 (17.1)	241 (63.4)	74 (19.5)	380
Spanish				
101	—	1 (100.0)	—	1
102	12 (11.5)	57 (54.8)	35 (33.7)	104
103	10 (14.7)	21 (30.9)	37 (54.4)	68
201	13 (17.1)	28 (36.8)	35 (46.1)	76
202	3 (3.4)	37 (42.0)	48 (54.5)	88
*203	3 (7.7)	17 (43.6)	19 (48.7)	39
Total	41 (10.9)	161 (42.8)	174 (46.3)	376

*--It is possible for students scoring high enough to earn exempt status, which accounts for the four "too low" evaluations in French 222 and the three "too low" evaluations in Spanish 203.

Table 2

Mean placement test scores and course GPA's by student evaluation of course placement in French, German, and Spanish*

	French			German			Spanish		
	Course Placement Evaluation			Course Placement Evaluation			Course Placement Evaluation		
101	Too Low	About Right	Too High	Too Low	About Right	Too High	Too Low	About Right	Too High
MLA Reading				146.1	144.8				
MLA Listening				144.6	144.4				
Grammar				32.9	32.0				
GPA				2.62	2.81				
N	2	4	0	21	62	0	0	1	0
102									
MLA Reading	152.6	149.5	144.6	153.9	151.5	148.5	151.8	149.6	147.1
MLA Listening	153.2	150.6	146.7	152.8	149.1	147.0	148.6	145.5	143.5
Grammar	60.2	63.0	63.3	46.7	41.9	37.9			
GPA	2.80	2.51	1.94	2.19	2.68	1.77	3.00	2.64	1.79
N	10	73	31	21	70	17	12	57	35
103									
MLA Reading	160.6	156.4	152.2	157.9	158.5	156.3	161.3	158.4	154.5
MLA Listening	158.5	155.1	154.6	154.6	155.6	153.0	161.4	151.9	153.1
Grammar	67.7	69.3	70.3	58.4	52.8	50.2			
GPA	2.91	2.26	2.32	3.12	2.64	1.84	3.30	2.40	1.89
N	11	54	50	17	61	31	10	21	37
201									
MLA Reading	166.0	163.9	162.1		165.2	162.6	171.8	171.6	163.6
MLA Listening	161.3	161.2	159.0		159.8	160.7	166.8	165.0	159.9
Grammar	74.2	75.6	74.6		63.2	57.2			
GPA	2.40	2.71	2.27		2.94	2.40	3.00	2.75	2.46
N	10	63	37	5	37	15	13	28	35
202									
MLA Reading		170.0	167.2		174.1	168.5		174.9	170.0
MLA Listening		165.8	162.7		168.1	165.0		169.8	166.1
Grammar		80.5	80.9		68.5	59.5			
GPA		2.80	2.14		3.20	1.82		3.19	2.19
N	5	51	36	1	10	11	3	37	48
203(222)									
MLA Reading		178.8	174.3					182.0	174.7
MLA Listening		178.2	172.4					176.2	172.9
Grammar		93.1	90.6						
GPA		2.91	2.32					3.46	1.90
N	4	23	25	0	1	0	3	17	19

*-Means are not computed for categories containing fewer than ten cases.

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Beanblossom, G. The effects of various types of delays on college foreign language achievement. Seattle: Bureau of Testing, University of Washington, 1970. (Duplicated report)